

The Allen Cemetery Exploring a Local Legend

by Brett Fuller

*Remember me as you pass by,
As you are now so once was I.
As I am now; so you must be,
Therefore prepare to follow me.*
-tombstone of Laura G. Allen
1868-1885

Early in 2014, during my first semester of graduate school at Texas State University, I began researching the local history of the surrounding Hays County. As a student of anthropology and history, I was fascinated with early funerary practices and cultural responses to death, making the county's large number of historic cemeteries, big and small, naturally interesting to me. The Hays County Historical Commission's website proved indispensable in this regard providing quality information on dozens of graveyards across the county. One in particular caught my attention. The Allen Cemetery, located northwest of the town of Buda in the northern part of the county, and holding a number of late nineteenth and early twentieth century graves belonging to the Allen/Good families, was the subject of an intriguing local legend. Lore held that the cemetery was established during a flu outbreak, something I found both interesting and worthy of study. If a major outbreak or epidemic in Hays County did occur, even in the 1800s, there should be some measure of evidence capable of proving or disproving the local story. In my search for the causes of the Allen deaths I began researching their lives. I started thinking about the Allen family as people rather than tombstones, which caused me to better understand the struggle for survival which occurred in what is now an idyllic Texas suburb.

The story of the Allen family and its cemetery is in many ways the story of the land that would become Hays County and the town of Buda. The family arrived long before the foundation of either and played a part in the formation of both. Though the Allen's involvement with the land would last for more than 150 years, this article will focus primarily on the latter half of the nineteenth century. This is the period of the cemetery's establishment and greatest expansion, with subsequent graves being fewer in number and farther apart chronologically. The

state of medicine at this time was extremely poor, barely above ancient standards, which resulted in frequent exposure to, and an incredible loss of life from, what we in this era consider treatable and curable illnesses (like what?). From 1850s to 1900, when the Allen family filled its cemetery, communicable disease ran rampant in Texas, brought on by a number of forces and vectors, including a number of greater epidemics, which affected the surrounding areas and nation as a whole.

In the spring of 1835 the Allens made their entry in the annals of Hays county history. A native of Chattanooga, Tennessee, Phillip J. Allen and his newlywed wife Jane Walker of North Carolina moved from their marital home in Bastrop, Texas, to settle the land west of Onion Creek in what became Hays County. The couple was one of two families to receive one league of land in a Mexican grant from the impresario Ben Milam along the creek, near the growing town of Mountain City.¹ The north and westerly sides of Onion Creek abutted a low and wide field, perfect for the raising of cattle. This field is still known as *Allen's Prairie* by some of the older residents of Buda, which would later spring up near the nascent land grant.² The family would live on its new property just long enough to erect a small home and begin farming before being driven out by local Native American groups who saw the area as a seasonal hunting ground, infringed upon by the coming waves of Euro-American settlers. The Allens, ejected from their land grant, returned to live in Bastrop, where Philip J. joined local revolutionary forces to fight for Texas' independence. Between 1837 and 1845 Jane Walker bore their first four children: James Valentine, Martha, John, and Sarah Allen. Eleven years after receiving their land grant, the Allen family moved back to the home on Onion Creek in 1846. Earlier that year Capt. John "Jack" C. Hays and the Texas Rangers had killed or driven off the Native Americans who had claimed stewardship of the land, and the Allen family was able to return to farming the wide lands of Allen's Prairie. The family would raise three more children on its Onion Creek property, and in 1848 when the surrounding land was consolidated into Hays County, Philip J. served as one of its first commissioners.³ As two of the foundational settlers of the Buda area, Philip J. and Jane Walker would continue to serve as iconic pillars of the community.

The life and livelihood of the Allen family was dramatically shaken on March 22, 1860, when Philip J. Allen died at the age of fifty-five. He left behind a wife, seven grieving children, and a large, successful farm. The family elected to bury him not on their land, but across Onion Creek on the southwest corner of property owned by the Eggleston family, the other group of Ben Milam's settlers to the region that would become Buda. The land they chose lay to the south and east of the creek and occupied higher ground than Allen's Prairie to the west.⁴ Marked with a squared tombstone bearing the simple inscription "In Memory Of," Philip J. Allen's grave laid the foundation for what became in later years a large and respectable family plot. It is with rare historical luck that on June 22 of that year, exactly one month to the day after the death of their patriarch, the Allen family received a unique visitor. This man was an agent of the US Census, and he recorded the family and estate that Philip J. Allen had left behind. Philip's wife, Jane, was

¹ Frances Stovall et al., *Clear springs and limestone ledges : a history of San Marcos and Hays County for the Texas Sesquicentennial* (Hays County Historical Commission, Austin, Tx; Nortex Press, 1986), 205.

² Younts, Barbara. "Buda's Historic Homes Share Kinship with Allen Cemetery." Hays County Free Press, January 5, 1995.

³ Stoval et al., *Clear Springs*, 206.

⁴ Cullen, Jim. "Guarding Local History: Allens' New Tracks Ranch Receives 150 Year Award," *Hays Free Press*, July 19, 2006.

now listed as head of household, and six of their children were still living at home. Their second born, Martha, was the eldest recorded child at twenty, and their last, Andrew, was only eight when his father died. The family members continued to live in the home they built themselves and farm their original land grant of Allen's Prairie, which was listed under the Manchaca Post Office that serviced a large area in between Austin and San Marcos. That property, bequeathed by Philip to his wife and family, was both large and profitable. The total real estate value of the Allen's land and home was \$5,000 in 1860, and though the Allen family did not own any slaves, the estimated value of their personal property was \$2,200.⁵ Jane Allen was by no means the wealthiest landowner in the area, but the combined value of her property and real estate equates to more than \$200,000 in today's currency.⁶ This sizable amount of wealth provided the foundation for the Allen family to continue to grow and prosper for generations to come.

In October 1862, John T. Allen was buried next to his father at the age of twenty, making what was once a frontier grave into an expanding cemetery. Over time, the lands around the Allens gravesites changed hands on multiple occasions and saw many different uses. Later owners were unconcerned with preservation, and consequently just under a third (12 of the total 38) of the stone grave markers have been either destroyed or rendered illegible through cattle grazing and human negligence. The Allen Cemetery is an incomplete record, but the stones that remain tell a particularly tragic story. There are only two remaining burials around the Allen father and son which date to the 1860s: Emma J. would follow her uncle and grandfather in November the following year at the age of two, and her brother Eddie was buried next to her four months later, three days after his birth. These were the children of John and Jane Allen's first born, James Valentine, who would bury five of his children and his wife there. Following his death, he too was interred in the family cemetery near his wife and children in 1927. As time progressed, the cemetery continued to provide space for child burials with several more infants interred in the 1870s. Not all of these children belonged to the Allen family, and in the 1870s the cemetery slowly began to fill with the graves of neighbors and later landowners. In 1878, Jane Walker joined her husband, son, and grandchildren along with a number of children and elderly who had been interred at her family cemetery. At the time of her death three families shared the graveyard with the Allen family, the Good family with whom they had intermarried, and two more that do not appear in the 1860 Census data.

After the death of Jane Walker only one stone marker still stands from the nineteenth century, that of Laura G. Allen, daughter of James Valentine, who was buried in 1885 at the age of seventeen. After Laura's death the cemetery appears to have gone unused until the 1920s. Lying at the edge of a growing township, abandoned by the family which created it, unused for almost 40 years with crumbling headstones bearing the names of pioneers, veterans, and a number of deceased children, the Allen Cemetery was ripe for a legend of some kind. To this end, the community of Buda gladly acquiesced and created a tale of disease, a flu epidemic, which ran rampant and swelled the cemetery in its early years. This legend, which is more than likely untrue given the wide range of time between each burial, must have been founded in a degree of factual evidence. There was a reason why the community of Buda chose to accept that

⁵ Bowers, Cynthia W., and Philip D. Del Rio, Anthony D. Mrugacz, and Adam C. Wall, trans. *The Census of 1860 in Hays County*. San Marcos: TSU Department of History: 2005, 6.

⁶ Measuring Worth. "Measuring Worth." *Measures of Worth, Inflation Rates, Relative Value, Worth of a Dollar, Purchasing Power*. Accessed March 18, 2014. <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php>

the Allen Cemetery formed during an epidemic of some kind, and that reason likely rests on the state of health in Texas during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The history of contagious disease in Texas is one that begins long before the Allen family and the arrival of the first United States settlers west of the Sabine. Since the arrival of European explorers and conquerors to the West Indies and Gulf of Mexico, waves of epidemic disease swept through the western world for centuries. Less than one thousand miles from the Allen's future residence, Tenochtitlan, the fallen capital of the Aztec empire, experienced a recorded ninety percent loss of Native American life from foreign disease. European diseases like measles, pneumonia, and the particularly devastating smallpox ravaged native peoples of North and South America for a hundred years after the conquests of Mexico and Peru. Areas like Texas and the North American Gulf Coast were particularly susceptible because their warm climates and low coastlands were not only affected by European maladies, but by tropical diseases from Africa and the East Indies, such as malaria, amoebic dysentery, and yellow fever.⁷ The Americas were also hosts to their own communicable diseases. Paleopathological data provides evidence regarding the spread of giardia, rabies, hepatitis, syphilis, and a number of other potentially lethal illnesses. These were prevalent among natives like the Karankawa, who inhabited the Texas coastlines and plains southeast of the Hill Country, and were just as capable of infecting Europeans. In 1528, the expedition of Cabeza de Vaca suffered from just such an affliction following its shipwreck onto the Texas coast near Galveston; a stomach illness killed many Europeans and their Karankawa hosts at the same time.⁸

Europeans eventually drew a correlation between the high incidence of disease and low lying coastal areas, believing that poor air quality caused illness. In 1835, three hundred years after de Vaca's failed expedition and the same year that Philip J. Allen received his land grant, Col. Juan N. Almonte completed a statistical report on the land and people of Texas for the president of Mexico. In it he stated "Although it cannot be said that the coast climate of Texas is deadly, one cannot but confess that it is unhealthy."⁹ Almonte had a far different impression of the inland Hill Country and its surrounding area. He described it as a healthful land that was almost free of disease as far south as Béxar. "Truly," said Almonte, "doctors in this section will not prosper."¹⁰ The Allens, as some of the earliest settlers to this section of Texas, may have come in part for the healthful climate. They certainly never had a reason to found a cemetery until 1860. However, because of the high incidence of burials in the Allen Cemetery during the late 1860s and early 1870s, along with the local legends purporting a flu epidemic to be the cause, something must have changed in the health of Central Texas after Almonte wrote his report.

During this time there were four major factors that likely worked together to significantly increase the chance of communicating diseases to residents of Central Texas. The first came with the massive influx of Euro-American settlers both after the Texas Revolution and after

⁷ Crosby, Alfred W. "Infectious Disease and the Demography of the Atlantic Peoples." *Journal of World History*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall, 1991), pp. 124.

⁸ Taylor, Matthew S. "Cabeza de Vaca and the Introduction of Disease to Texas." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 111, No. 4 (Apr., 2008), pp. 423.

⁹ Almonte, Juan N. and C.E. Castañeda. "Statistical Report on Texas [1835]." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Jan., 1925), pp. 183.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 183.

annexation to the United States. The governments of both Mexico and Texas had advertised the region's profusion of clean air, water, and sunlight as a curative for any disease. Many immigrants to the state, possibly as many as twenty percent, were in search of a climate they believed would benefit their health.¹¹ Many pioneers coming from the Mississippi River valley regularly suffered from dysentery and malaria in their home states but brought chronic diseases like tuberculosis with them when they came to Texas. It is estimated that as many as a quarter million of these people settled in the state during the second half of the nineteenth century, and many more visited seasonally to take advantage of the climate.¹² These people who sought health could have ironically spread their diseases to healthy people in Texas.

The second likely factor came from the high number of US troops garrisoned in Texas both before and after the Civil War. Army medical information from the time posits that troops stationed in frontier Texas forts, a full fifth of all soldiers prior to the Civil War, experienced a significantly lower standard of health than the rest of the army.¹³ Frontier soldiers, settlers, and Native Americans regularly interacted and therefore regularly communicated diseases between one another. Soldiers and settlers were especially likely to share illnesses, often being of proximal age and exposed to similar conditions. Military medical data put the leading causes of death in Texas as digestive disorders and fevers, statistics that the civilian population likely shared.¹⁴

A third factor lay in the poor quality of available healthcare. Though there were doctors and pharmacists of all different calibers in Texas during the latter nineteenth century, they were limited in their effectual capacity. A major part of this limitation was based on the prescribed treatment of illnesses with medicines that may have done more harm than good. Local healthcare providers at the time regularly sold ineffectual curatives like licorice, caffeine, and rose oil alongside potentially lethal prescriptions of codeine sulfate, tincture of opium, belladonna, and arsenic. It is entirely possible, likely in fact, that these medicines could kill a patient as easily as they could cure them. Additionally most medicines were manufactured locally by the same people who sold them, without the quality controls that modern healthcare systems require.¹⁵

The fourth and final factor that contributed to the downturn of health in Central Texas was the development of the Chisholm Trail. Between 1867 and 1884, the trail existed from southern Texas to Kansas for the transportation of cattle to railway stations. Thousands of cowboys moved millions of animals from a number of large feeder trails that wound as far south as the Rio Grande. One of these feeders ran from San Antonio to Austin, right next door to the Allen farm and cemetery.¹⁶ It was the cowboys of the cattle trails that likely knit the state together in a picture of ill health during the latter half of the century. Many of these men came

¹¹ Jones, Billy M. "Health Seekers in Early Anglo-American Texas." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (Jan., 1966), pp. 287.

¹² *Ibid*, 289.

¹³ Breeden, James O. "The Health of Early Texas: The Military Frontier." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (Apr., 1977), pp. 362.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 373.

¹⁵ Hall, Ester J.W. "Hermes Drug in La Grange: a Pioneer Texas Store." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Jul., 1966), pp. 69.

¹⁶ Gard, Wayne. "Retracing the Chishom Trail." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Jul., 1956), pp. 54.

from the same immigrant groups who arrived in Texas for its climate and likely already possessed communicable or chronic diseases. Cowboys also had consistent contact with diseased populations not limited to their livestock, including US soldiers, Native Americans, cattle-town prostitutes, and worst of all, each other.

It is for these reasons that the history of early Texas is one punctuated by disease. Nearly every county in the state can name at least one epidemic or scare that swept across its population, leaving many deaths in its wake. Records of the 1860s and 1870s report a number of yellow fever, malaria, typhoid, and dysentery outbreaks in Central Texas and across the Gulf Coast. So it is with a degree of truth that the people of Buda created a local legend of the Allen family dying off during a flu epidemic. Such a thing was not uncommon at that time, especially since the cemetery began to fill again in the 1920s, a few years after the Spanish Flu epidemic, which rocked the state in 1918. Community memory should not be disregarded, though. While the deaths of the Allens and the expansion of the cemetery may not have been caused by a single epidemic, there is no reason to believe that disease was not a factor in their deaths. In fact, given the ages of the deceased and the months and years in which they died, a series of successive illnesses is an extremely likely possibility for the growth of the Allen Cemetery.

The first, and possibly most jarring, observation of the Allen Cemetery is the incredibly high infant mortality of James Valentine's children. Losses like those experienced by the Allen family were unusually high and likely the product of the children's exposure to infectious disease. In many developing countries, of which the 1860s and 1870s Texas closely resembled, high infant mortality rates are linked directly to diseases like whooping cough and measles in combination with malnutrition of both mother and child.¹⁷ Poor nutrition was an issue that continually plagued Texans, many of whom lived on a low-vitamin diet, and was the cause of much illness in US soldiers stationed in western garrisons. It is entirely possible that the quality of food eaten by the Allen family during this period was lacking in nutritional value, given that many of James Valentine's children were born and died in the coldest winter months. The winter of 1873, when they lost their first two children, was supposedly long and bitter, noted for the blizzard which swept over the county.¹⁸

Another possibility lies in the transmission of diseases from child to child. A number of schoolhouses would open in and around Buda during the 1850s and 1870s, beginning with Live Oak Academy in 1855.¹⁹ According to the 1860 census data, all of the Allen children ranging from ages seventeen to eight, with the exception of James Valentine and Martha who were adults at the time, had attended school that year.²⁰ If a communicable disease or series of illnesses affected the community at that time, it was inevitable that infected children would spread it to others at school and then take it home with them to spread among their families. Schools have always been a breeding ground for sickness.

¹⁷ Scott, Susan and C.J. Duncan. "Malnutrition, Pregnancy, and Infant Mortality: A Biometric Model." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 30, No.1 (Summer 1999), pp. 39.

¹⁸ Stoval et al, *Clear Springs*, 370.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 208.

²⁰ Bowers, Cynthia W., and Philip D. Del Rio, Anthony D. Mrugacz, and Adam C. Wall, trans. *The Census of 1860 in Hays County*, 6.

There is a third, and equally likely option for the spread of disease to the Allen family, and that comes directly from exposure to the Chisholm Trail. William Allen, together with his brother Philip Hansbrough and a few local men would drive cattle up the trail beginning in the 1870s. Their exposure to disease was noted in a later interview with William, who described a Kansas incident in 1873 where he nursed his friend Bob Barton, also a member of the local community, back to health after suffering a case of *brain fever* — likely encephalitis or meningitis — for thirty days.²¹ There is no doubt that these two brothers were exposed to a great many communicable illnesses during their yearly circuit of the trail, returning home every winter with a new collection of microbes shared with cattle drivers from across the state. There is a very real possibility that the Allen brothers unknowingly spread those illnesses to their families and communities, probably leading to the unintentional deaths of their nieces and nephews.

Ultimately, what happened to the Allen family, the true cause of the cemetery's expansion, and the reason behind the five untimely deaths of James Valentine's children will always remain shrouded in legend. Even with access to death records the information presented would be limited to the discretion and knowledge of the recording clerk. The Allen family would remain a fixture in the county, if not on their original prairie, for years to come. The trail riding Philip Hansbrough would even come to serve the same commissarial position as his father, and Hansborough's son, also named Philip, would serve forty-five years in local law enforcement, eventually becoming sheriff in 1916.²² Given the length of time and powerful positions held by the family in local politics, it is likely that the legends surrounding the Allen land and cemetery were created and perpetuated by the family itself — a mechanism of coping with a poorly understood tragedy that happened over one hundred and fifty years ago on a frontier turned suburbia.

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²¹ Stoval et al., *Clear Springs*, 369.

²² *Ibid*, 206.

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